On Church and Community

By

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Preface

It has always been in my nature to reflect on my life - where I have been, where I am, and where I might be going. Recently I have been on my past I have thought about where I have been to school, what I have studied in school as well as what I have not studied in school but rather studied informally on my own with the help of others such as Bishop Hugh Strickland. At one time – a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away – I was a graduate student in Philosophy at Northern Illinois University. And I was reminded of an incident that happened there on 02/14/08, St. Valentine's Day, when a person shot and killed 5 students and turned the gun on himself as well as injuring several others. A mass shooting. It was not the first, there was Virginia Tech, etc., and there have been several since such as Sandy Hook Elementary. And these are just in schools. Other mass shooting such as some more recent ones Colorado, California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Florida, Texas, etc. are in other settings.

How, as Christians, shall we respond? What, if any, might our role be with respect to such incidents? By what we have done, or left undone? Last Sunday I noted that making God one's ultimate concern involves making serving those who have gone astray our ultimate concern. What does so doing entail? With respect to such incidents – and less dramatic ones such as a person stealing what you have so they might eat – what sort of reflection and self-examination must we all undertake? In what follows I attempt to make some progress in answering these questions.

I. On Context/Review

Let me begin with a review of some of what was said last Sunday in order to, again, provide context. The context I would like to provide comes from a book by theologian Paul Tillich. In his book entitled **Dynamics of Faith** Tillich claims:

> "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man's ultimate concern. Man, like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence, such as food and shelter. But man, in contrast to other living beings, has a spiritual – cognitive, aesthetic, social, political. Some of them are urgent, often extremely urgent, and each other as well as the vital concerns can claim ultimacy for a human life or the life of a social group. **If it claims ultimacy it demands the**

> **total surrender of the one who accepts this claim, even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name.** … . **But it is not only the unconditional demand made by that which is one's ultimate concern, it is also the promise of ultimate fulfillment which is accepted in the act of faith.** … . … it is "ultimate fulfillment" that is promised, and it is exclusion from such fulfillment which is threatened if the unconditional demand is not met. An example – and more than an example – is the faith manifest in the religion of the Old Testament. It also has the character of ultimate concern in demand, threat and promise. … . "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:5). This is what ultimate concern means and from these words the term "ultimate concern" is derived. They state unambiguously the character of genuine faith, the demand of total surrender to the subject of ultimate concern. … . Faith, for the men of the Old Testament, is the state of being ultimately and unconditionally concerned about Jahweh and about what he represents in demand, threat, and promise. … .
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> **Another example – almost a counter-example, yet nevertheless equally revealing – is the ultimate concern with "success" and with social standing and economic power. It is the god of many people in the highly competitive Western culture and it does what every ultimate concern must do: it demands unconditional surrender to its laws even if the price is the sacrifice of genuine human relations, personal conviction, and creative *eros.* Its threat is social and economic defeat, and its promise – indefinite as all such promises – the fulfillment of one's being." (pp 1-3)**
>
> Faith, [then], is a total and centered act of the personal self, the act of unconditional, infinite, and ultimate concern. … . [and]…, the ultimate concern is about what is experienced as ultimate. (pp 9-10).

Now, paraphrasing Tillich, Ultimate concern is the centered act of the personality through which one believes. The ultimate itself is that toward which the centered act is directed, the faith which is believed. (p. 10) Tillich again:

> "The ultimate of the act of faith and the ultimate that is meant in the act of faith are one and the same. This symbolically expressed by the mystics when they say that their knowledge of God is the Knowledge God has of Himself; and it is expressed by Paul when he says (I Cor. 13) that he will know as he is known, namely, by God. God can never be object without being at the same time subject. **Even a successful prayer is, according to Paul (Rom. 8), not possible without God as Spirit praying within us. … . In the act of faith that which is the source of this act is present beyond the cleavage of subject and object. It is present as both and beyond both." (p.11).**

One's ultimate concern, then, is the organizing principle of one's being, one's life. It is that through which all things are seen – ascribed meaning, that for the sake of which all acts are committed, and the means by which those acts are committed. And it is made possible by God in us, the Holy Spirit. "It" is

making following Christ our ultimate concern.

At Ash Wednesday it was said that Lent has to do with reorientation to God through self examination, prayer, and self sacrifice. If Tillich is correct, then Lent has to do with our reorienting ourselves to God, making Him our ultimate concern, having God be the organizing principle of our being, our life, that through which all things are seen – ascribed meaning (through which we understand and therefore (how we) experience His Creation), that for the sake of which all acts are committed, and the means by which those acts are committed.

Last week, the Gospel reading had to do with the temptations with which Jesus was confronted by the Devil in the wilderness. We, as was Jesus, are tempted not to have serving God as our ultimate concern, in particular, we are tempted to make ourselves our ultimate concern, and interestingly, as a reason for worshiping God, and thus separating ourselves off/away from God, the source of our being. Giving into temptation, then, is to separate ourselves from God. In so doing we also separate ourselves away from God by not seeing that He is the source of our being, relying on self alone or some other entity or being.

But what does not giving into temptation, making serving God through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit our Ultimate Concern entail?

- Does making our serving God our Ultimate Concern entail what it could be seen as entailing, namely, that we should not eat bread as man does not live by bread alone?
- Does making our serving God our Ultimate Concern entail that we do not seek material gain/status?
- Does making our serving God our Ultimate Concern entail that we do not seek to be like God?
- *[Note: These questions are a review from last Sunday's sermon. Here is a new one.*
- Does making serving God our Ultimate Concern entail that we condemn sinners and make it clear to them where they are headed if they do not repent?

I believe the answer to these questions is **no!** For:

- It is not satisfying physical gratification that is the problem for we need bread to live. Rather it is when doing so becomes our ultimate end that we run into trouble. For this entails that we are no longer guided by the Word of God and thus serving God, but rather are serving ourselves, thereby separating us from our source of being.
- It is not striving for material gain that is the problem. Rather it is when we make material gain our ultimate end that we run into trouble. For this entails at least in part, making ourselves (by making material gain our ultimate end – which we take to be to our advantage), and not God our ultimate concern, thus, separating ourselves from our source of being.
- It is not attempting to be like God that is the problem, for this is our ultimate goal - to be like Christ by following His example in our unconditionally forgiving, loving, and thus, serving one another (and therefore God) as He through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit unconditionally forgives, loves, and thus serves us. Rather it is when we attempt to be like God on our own, failing to see our need for His help (self assertion), or, attempt to be God's equal that we run into trouble. For this entails - make a wild guess at what is

coming next – separating ourselves from our source of our being – which ultimately leads to failure. For we cannot ensure that we will not give into our temptation to do that which separates us from our source of being – GOD – if we attempt not to do so on our own. For the attempt itself is separating ourselves from our source of being – which we call sin.

- Note: Again, these answers are a review from last Sunday's sermon. Consider also,
- It is not so much that we shouldn't help others who have gone astray see that they have so strayed, but rather, it is how we help them see this that is the difficulty. For if we judge and shun those have strayed, not only do we play God, but we also separate ourselves off from them and we [guess again?] separate ourselves off from the source of our being in our so doing.

When we are separated from our source of being – what makes our life possible - we die. But we need not die. For God became like us in Christ so that we might become like Him in act through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit and LIVE. And as it was said in the sermon for Ash Wednesday, throughout the Season of Lent, we turn back to God, to life in and through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit by discovering through reflection and self examination when and how (e.g., by giving into temptation, temptation to judge and shun fellow sinners) we have turned away from the Sunlight of His Spirit and **begun to die.**

Body

But we need not die. John 3:16-17 tells us:

> **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.**
>
> **"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."**

And our salvation is not something we earn – a view, notably, that is at the foundation of our so judging and shunning others. Rather, it is a **gift** we received by **faith** in Christ. By faith in Christ we are born anew of water and the Spirit and are able see and enter His Kingdom here and now. God became like us in Christ so that we might become like Him through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit. By our faith in Christ we are born of water and the Spirit receive God's **gift** of Grace, His Gift of His Holy Spirit at baptism, and are able to become like Christ and Live in His Kingdom.

In the past we have seen His Kingdom present with us in the outpouring of support for people negatively impacted by mass shootings such as Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, Sandy Hook Elementary, Colorado, California. Yet, with respect to these I have seen little for those who committed the murders, the sinner among fellow sinners.

We are born anew of water and the Spirit and live in God's Kingdom here and now only to the extent that we manifest in action Christ (God) in us to the world, become outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace that is God through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit in us. And Christ came

into the world not to condemn but rather to save. It is, then, to the person who received little support some 17 years ago at NIU, to the shooters, also, and especially, that we are called to reach out, and for whom we are called to pray, and, in general, supporting them being our Ultimate Concern.

Mission

By means of God's gift of His Grace given us through Christ at baptism, we are able to see that the mission of the Church of which Christ is the cornerstone and we, the Church, His body here and now, our mission is to bring the kingdom of God to all we encounter by living to God as opposed to ourselves. To live to God instead of ourselves, to make following Christ instead of ourselves our Ultimate Concern is to make one another's well being, (especially those whom, on the basis of social convention, or worse yet, on the basis of religious conviction, we are tempted to judge and shun), our Ultimate Concern. And this is to make bringing His message of unconditional love, and forgiveness and inclusion, to all we encounter our Ultimate Concern, by acts of forgiveness etc. Only when we do this do we fully experience the Kingdom of God in our lives here and now. Not to do this is to miss the mark and separate ourselves off from God and His kingdom. When we live to ourselves by rejecting others, giving them what we take to be their due or attempting to get what we take to be ours, we reject, and therefore, do not have Christ as our head and cornerstone and we miss the mark and abide outside His Kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

Bring the message of love, and forgiveness and inclusion, to all we encounter, by acts of forgiveness etc. is not easy to do. If you are like me you are tempted and thus have a tendency to respond to someone who does you wrong in some way with pay back. You hit me! Well, alright, I would watch over my shoulder if I were you for you will get what you deserve. Consider again, then, the person who killed the people at Northern Illinois University. How shall we respond? Will we reject him? If we do, then we wither. But, have we not already?! Consider the following from a paper I wrote in an Advanced Qualitative Research class at the University of Arkansas while working towards a Ph.D. in Counselor Education in which I reported on a chapter of the text for that class, namely, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research 3rd ed.*:

Metaphor for Chapter 35

Goffman

In his "Moral Career of a Mental Patient" Erving Goffman sets forth what he considers to be important situations through which a person goes that impacts the person's understanding of self and the world when moving from person in the world to patient in the hospital. According to Goffman (1961), people go from beginning with the rights and privileges of persons to becoming a mental patient in a locked ward. "I am suggesting that the prepatient starts out with at least a portion of the rights, liberties, and satisfactions of the civilian and ends up on a psychiatric ward stripped of almost everything. The question here is how this stripping is managed" (p. 140). The impact on the person this stripping has is the "moral career" of the patient when going to one from the other due to sociological forces. "… the moral aspects of career-that is, the regular sequence of changes that career entails in the person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others" (p. 128). Goffman goes on to say:

> *"But once started on the way, they are confronted by some importantly similar circumstances and respond to these in some importantly similar ways. Since these similarities do not come from mental illness, they would seem to occur in spite of it. It is thus a tribute to the power of social forces that the uniform status of mental patient cannot only assure an aggregate of persons a common fate and eventually, because of this, a common character,. ." (p.129).*

It is on these importantly similar circumstances that lead people to respond in importantly similar ways that I want to focus here, the social forces we ourselves maintain by being complicit with them.

So, for example, the person to whom the one looks to ensure that admission to a mental hospital will not be one's fate is the same person to whom professionals look to secure that fate. Consequently there is a sense of betrayal felt by the person who eventually ends up on a psychiatric ward. "For the person to whom the patient turns for help-for protection against such threats as involuntary commitment-is just the person to whom the mediators and hospital administrators logically turn for authorization. It is understandable, then, that some patients will come to sense, at least for a time, that the closeness of a relationship tells nothing of its trustworthiness" (p.143).

A final point that Goffman (1961) makes worth considering for present purposes is the actual reason why people end up on a mental ward. He claims that people so end up not so much because of offences their mental illness has led them to perpetrate, which, today, unfortunately, tends to land them in prison, (judgement, punishment, shunning), but rather, primarily because of what have come to be known as career contingencies such as socioeconomic status, amount of treatment facilities available. "The society's view is that inmates of mental hospitals are there primarily because they are suffering from mental illness. However, in the degree that the "mentally ill" outside hospitals numerically approach or surpass those inside hospitals, one could say that mental patients distinctively suffer not form mental illness, but from contingencies" (p.135). These contingencies are also of importance.

What, then, are the importantly similar circumstances and career contingencies that with which we are complicit that led to a person killing five students, himself, and injuring several other students on a college campus?
Some points from the chapter

1. *"Throughout "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Freire argued that the goal of education is to begin to name the world and to recognize that we all are "subjects" of our own lives and narratives, not "objects" in the stories of others. <u>We must acknowledge the ways in which we, as humans, are fundamentally charged with producing and transforming reality together. Those who do not acknowledge this or those who want to control and oppress, are committing a kind of "violence</u>"" (p.889).*

2. *The way to recognize this is through conscientization,(e.g., raise our critical consciousness), through "praxis," (e.g., critical reflection), by means of dialogue in focus groups so that we might come to see the forces and the language used to maintain these forces that shape our reality and in the process begin to transform that reality and ourselves. "Freire's insistence that the*

unending process of emancipation must be a collective effort is far from trivial. Central to this process is a faith in the power of dialogue. Importantly, for Freire, dialogue is defined as collective reflection or action. He believed that dialogue, fellowship, and solidarity are essential to human liberation and transformation" (p.890). And liberation is not a result of the efforts of the oppressed individual or another liberating that individual, but rather, ***a result of men in communion with each other****.*

3. *The starting point is the concrete existential situation in which contradictions are imbedded, and presenting the situation as a problem that requires not merely an intellectual response, but also a response of action.*

Given these considerations, had we not already judged, rejected, and condemned the shooter at NIU – who, as it turns out, suffered from mental illness - before he shot anyone? Did we not fail to critically reflect together? In so doing did we not do him violence? Did we not do ourselves violence?

During the Season of Lent we are all called to reflect together on the social forces we create that entail the career and associated contingencies of a person that comes to kill five students and injure several others on a college campus. We must see our collective responsibility for the tragedy of St. Valentines Day, 02/14/08, for the social forces that are maintained through our not so reflecting together, through our "violence." To quote the lyrics of a song in the movie entitled "The Saint of Fort Washington," "[Must we not] hang our heads in shame for what we have done [to ourselves] in His name." For as John Donne quite eloquently states:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Then and now, after the shootings, I noticed flags flying low everywhere I went. But for whom did the flags so fly? For whom were the memorial service? For those shot at Virginia Tech? For those shot at NIU? at Sandy Hook? Paris? Christ Church New Zealand? I suggest, following Donne, that it is for us who remain that they so flew/fly, a memorial of our living death that is the result of our giving into temptation and having failed to follow Christ in the Unity of His Spirit then and now, by our so critically reflecting.

During Lent we are called to self-examination to discover where we, individually and collectively, turned away from God in each other, condemning rather than forgiving, leaving alone rather than unconditionally supporting as we are unconditionally forgiven, loved, and supported (made righteous) by God through Christ by His gift of righteousness, in the Unity of His Spirit. And we are called to remember that it is for us, all of us, that Christ came into the world to save, and that it is to

the proclaiming in thought, word, and deed, of the saving nature of God's unconditional forgiveness and love for us and all His Creation that we are called by God in and through Christ.

For, it is we who need the Grace of God in Christ, the Grace of forgiveness secured for us in Christ's one full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. This is the good news of the New Covenant we are called to proclaim, that we – including the shooters - are unconditionally forgiven our sins through Christ. No matter how great or many our sins we can always turn to Him and find life in Him by following His example in act. No matter how many times we reject others or pay back those who injure us – and in so doing harm ourselves – we can always turn to Him and He will forgive us and help us live in accordance with His example, providing the means by which we might in act flourish. For He loves us. For this reason He is always with us. We need never be alone. For we can always turn to Him and He will comfort us, forgiving us, and providing us with the way to new life in Him so that we might live through following His example. For Christ has made of himself an example by suffering on the cross so that we might be freed from sin to pursue righteousness. Freed from sin through unconditional forgiveness, and we are called to do the same – to forgive and seek to help those who unjustly do us harm by our critically reflecting together to see how we, collectively, are complicit with what happens around us – to see things we have left undone. As the word of a hymn by Martin Luther "A Mighty Fortress":

Though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear for God hath willed
His Truth to triumph **through us**

When we allow ourselves to become, by example, manifestations of His saving Grace, being each others sure foundation, we are bound together as one, as one body in Christ in the world in the Unity of the Holy Spirit and live in His Kingdom. **Thus In so doing we fulfill our mission, our ministry, the ministry of the Church, *to bring the kingdom of God to all we encounter.*** This is the miracle, the miracle of God working through those through whom there was an outpouring of support for all those impacted then at Sandy Hook, Northern Illinois University, Virginia Tech., etc. And these tragedies – then and now - are a reminder of our need for God's grace reorienting us through them by mean of our critically reflecting together on them, to making God (following Christ) our Ultimate Concern by living to/for each other as opposed to living for ourselves, to being thus transformed in act, being born again, dying to living for self and born to living to God by living for each other, born anew to serving others so that such a tragedies as we witnessed then, (e.g., NIU, etc.), need not happen again by our failure to critically reflect together and respond today and in the future.

During the Season of Lent, as has been said, through self-examination we discover when and how we have turned away from God. And we ask His forgiveness for having so turned. And in the asking we are reminded of His unconditional forgiveness, and therefore, to what we are called - to unconditionally forgive and love others as God through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit unconditionally forgives and loves us. By asking for forgiveness for turning away from the saving nature of God's love for us in Christ, we begin moving towards God, towards life, through following His example in Christ, to reconcile ourselves with Him through our reconciliation with one another; thereby preparing ourselves to share in His resurrection, His divinity at Easter. As

God took on our nature so that we might take on His, during the Season of Lent we to move to do that for which we now pray:

Prayer

Mmay God grant us the ability to accept and be guided by His gift given through Christ of the Holy Spirit, so we may resist temptation and walk in His Light, the Light of Christ, the Sunlight of His Spirit, by following Christ's example and making our serving one another, and thus God, our Ultimate Concern, that God, through us, is gracious to all who have gone astray from His ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of His Word, Jesus Christ His Son, that **when others shall call, and the He through us will answer; when they cry for help, and He, though us will say, Here I am. *Amen*.**

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BLESSINGS and PEACE to ALL!!!
+MWH

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